

My Side of the Mountain

by
Jean Craighead George

**Author
Biography**

**Chapter
Summaries**

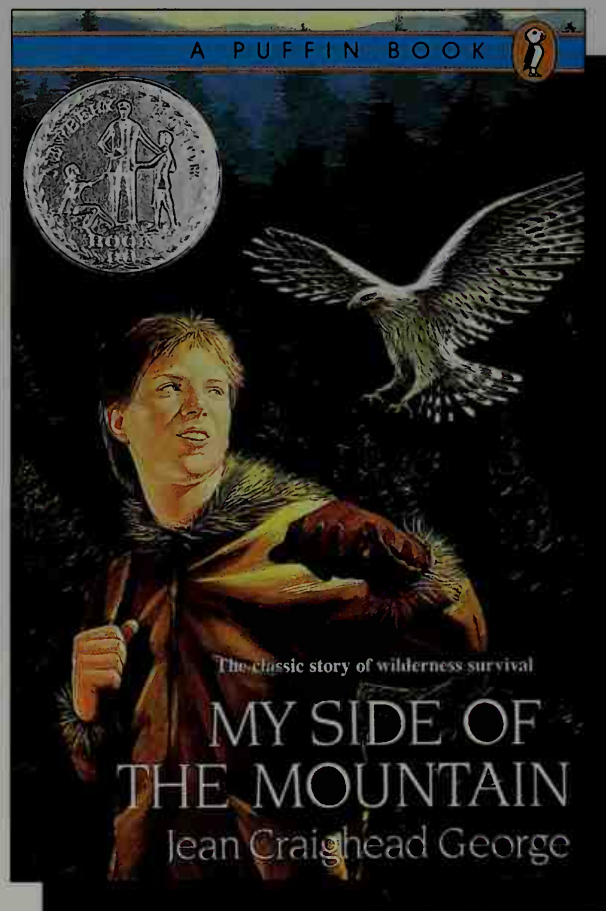
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ISBN 0-590-06571-8

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**SCHOLASTIC
LITERATURE GUIDE
GRADES 4-8**

My Side of the Mountain

➤ by ➤

Jean Craighead George

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Written by Tara McCarthy
Cover and interior design by Drew Hires
Interior illustrations by Drew Hires

Photo credits: Cover: MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN by Jean Craighead George. Cover illustration by Michael Garland ©1987.
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ISBN 0-590-06571-8

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Before Reading the Book

SUMMARY

Sam Gribley, a teenager tired of the tumult of life in New York City with his large family, runs away to live alone on an abandoned, gone-to-wild Catskill mountainside that belongs to his family and that was once his great-grandfather's farm. Because he's done a monumental amount of research beforehand, Sam is savvy about basic ways to make-do in a wilderness. And this he does well and happily for a year, combining pioneering know-how with his ingenuity, his love of adventure and of being alone, and his rich capacities for learning from and delighting in the natural world. Occasional encounters with other people keep Sam aware of his ties to the outside world. At the end of his glorious year alone, he accepts the fact that he must incorporate his family and his friends into the environment he has created for himself.



MAIN STORY CHARACTERS

People:

Sam Gribley	
Miss Turner	a librarian
Bando	a professor
Matt Spell	a newspaper employee

Main Animal Characters:

The Baron	a weasel
Frightful	a hawk
Jessie James	a raccoon
Barometer	a nuthatch

VARIOUS OTHER MINOR CHARACTERS

Sam's parents
and eight siblings

Aaron: a songwriter

Bill: teaches Sam to make fire

Residents of Delhi, NY:

97-yr. old Mrs. Fielder

"Mr Jacket" (Tom Sidler)

A multitude of other
wild animals whom
Sam observes and names

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Today as in her childhood, Jean Craighead George likes to go off alone to explore places uninhabited by humans. "That," she says, "is just the perfect thing for the mind." In this way, the author is much like the main characters in several of her fiction books; for example, in *Julie of the Wolves*, *The Talking Earth*, and *My Side of the Mountain*, young people learn about the natural world and their place in it by leaving home for a while to live a solitary life in the wilderness. For George, extensive first-hand and follow-up research into an ecosystem doesn't always mean that the fiction book comes easily. If she's dissatisfied with the first draft, she'll redo a book from the beginning. "I put *My Side of the Mountain* on the shelf and started it over again," she recalls.



Students may enjoy reading some of George's nonfiction, then discuss how she uses facts about nature in her fiction stories, too. For example, students can choose a section of *My Side of the Mountain* and determine how scientific phenomena are used to move the plot along and to help readers visualize the setting.

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS

Other Books by Jean Craighead George

- Realistic Fiction: *On the Far Side of the Mountain*
- "Ecological Mysteries": *Who Really Killed Cock Robin?*; *The Missing 'Gator of Gumbo Limbo*
- Non-fiction series: *One Day in the Woods*, et al.; *The Moon of the Alligators*, et al. in the *Thirteen Moons* series

VOCABULARY

In your preview of the book, point out that George uses ordinary words in unusual ways to help readers see what is happening. Present these examples for class discussion of word pictures:

- a..." curtain of blizzard"
- "rocks upholstered with moss"
- wind "drained down from the mountaintop"
- a librarian is "scattering herself around the aisles"
- light from a campfire made trees "warm and friendly"
- birds were "pouring over the limbs"

Ask each student to find and note several other unusual descriptive words or phrases while reading the book. As a summarizing activity, students can form small groups to tell what the phrases help them see in their mind's eye; or, paint pictures of their mental images, and label the pictures with quotations from the story.

FACTS ABOUT REALISTIC FICTION

My Side of the Mountain is an example of realistic fiction because it meets these criteria: **Fiction**— The plot is made up, and so are the characters. **Realistic** —The place and time of the action are real (the Catskill Mountains about 40 years ago); the details about the environment are factual, not imaginary; the characters in the story behave in logical, recognizable ways.

NOTES ABOUT A STORY THEME

A major premise in *My Side of the Mountain* is that an intelligent, well-informed, and determined teenager can happily survive all alone for a whole year in the wilderness. Before sharing the book, discuss this premise with the class; enter students' brainstormed responses to the question in the first column of a poster-paper chart. Suggest that students copy the chart and answer the second and third questions as they read and discuss the book.

LIVING ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

1. First Thoughts:	2. Midway in the Story:	3. At the End:
Could I live alone in the wild for a year?	Could I do what Sam has done so far?	Have I changed my mind about my answer to 1?
My explanation:	My explanation:	My explanation:

GETTING STARTED

As you preview the book with students, you might discuss the following:

- **Title** - What does the word *My* in the title tell you about the narrator? (*The story has a first-person narrator.*) Scan the book to check your response.
- **Front and back covers** - After studying the illustration and the blurb, what questions do you hope the story will answer?
- **Story organization** - Scan the book to find the titles of some of the sections. What is unusual about these titles? (*They are sentences or phrases, for example: This is About the Old, Old Tree. They summarize what will happen in that section.*)
- **Illustrations** - Some of the illustrations show scenes or events. What other kinds of illustrations can you find? (*how-to diagrams and pictures; labeled pictures of plants, structures, etc.*) How do you think these will be useful to you as a reader?

TEACHER TIP

The narrator, Sam, intersperses his story with journal entries he made during his year alone. Early on, make sure students can identify the journal entries: one or more narrative paragraphs set off from the rest of the story by quotation marks. Discuss how journal entries can be memory-joggers that help the writer recall an incident more fully. Suggest that students find such entries in their own journals and expand upon them, as Sam does.

Exploring the Book

PART 1

From beginning through "Frightful Learns Her ABC's"

WHAT HAPPENS

The book begins with Sam's journal description of a fearsome December storm. Then the story flashes back to the previous spring and early summer: Sam leaves the city, hitchhikes to the Catskill Mountains, and locates his great-grandfather's property. He builds a shelter in the trunk of a tremendous tree, gathers and stores wild foods, and makes clothing from deer hide. He takes a falcon chick from its nest, names her Frightful, and begins to tame and train the bird so that she can hunt for him.

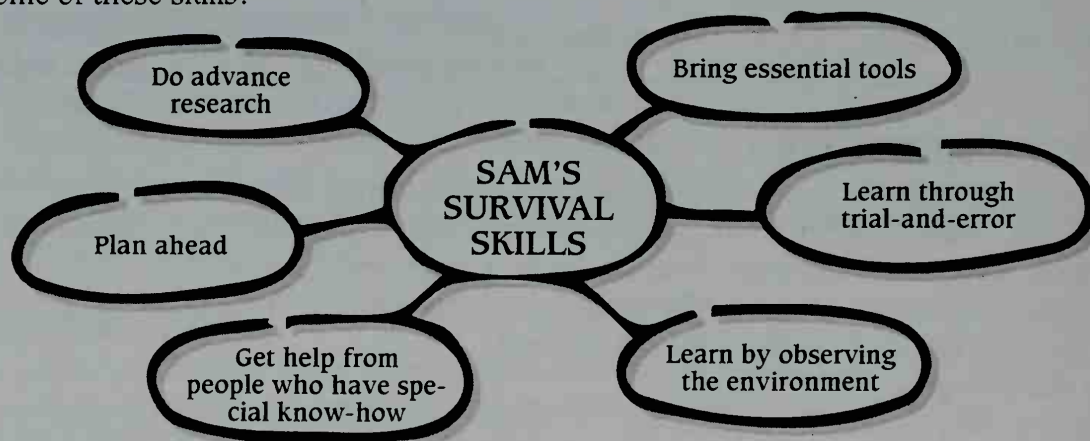
QUESTIONS TO TALK ABOUT

COMPREHENSION AND RECALL

1. Why has Sam run away to the mountains? (*His city home is crowded; he wants to find the Gribbley farm; he wants to be independent and live alone.*)
2. What tasks does he set for himself once he finds the property? (*get food, build a shelter, make warm clothes, learn to make fire*)

HIGHER LEVEL THINKING SKILLS

3. Sam uses various survival skills to make a home in the wilderness. What are some of these skills?



4. Why doesn't Sam's father prevent him from leaving home? (*Possible: believes Sam will return very soon; understands Sam's need to explore; trusts Sam to do the right thing*)

LITERARY ELEMENTS

5. The book begins with a journal entry about a December storm. Then the story flashes back to the previous May. Why do you think the book begins with the winter event? (*Possible: The storm is an exciting interest-grabber. The beginning makes you curious: you want to read on to find out how the boy got into this situation.*)

PERSONAL RESPONSE

6. In what ways does Sam seem unusual compared to other people of his age? In what ways does he seem much like other young people?

CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

GEOGRAPHY: *Where's Sam?*

Suggest that students use a state-by-state United States road atlas, such as Rand McNally's, to pinpoint Sam's mountain. In the process, to illustrate how a road atlas is a resource for armchair explorers as well as for motorists, have students (1) figure out the order in which state maps are presented (alphabetically) and find the map of New York State; (2) refer to *My Side of the Mountain* to identify Sam's starting point (New York City) and the mountain town to which he travels (Delhi, NY); (3) use the index to cities and towns at the back of the atlas to find the letter-number key for these places, then locate the places on the map; (4) use the compass rose and the mileage-scale to determine how far and in what general direction Sam traveled from New York City to Delhi (northwest, about 180 miles).

SPEAKING AND LISTENING: *Here's How*

This section of the book, like all the others, is full of Sam's how-to descriptions. Invite students to find a how-to that particularly interests them, such as how to make a fishhook, or how to boil water in a leaf. Students can then slowly read the how-to to a group of classmates. The audience should listen and (1) write the steps; (2) discuss whether the instructions are clear and complete, and, if not, discuss what else they would need to do or know before carrying out the process themselves.

WRITING: *Postcards from Sam*

Sam writes a note to Bill, who showed him how to make a campfire, but then discards the note. Ask students to imagine they are Sam, and write postcard messages to Bill or to other people who are important to Sam: his family; Miss Turner, the librarian; the trucker who gave him a lift. Suggest to students that they make the message something that the recipient would be particularly interested in. For example, Miss Turner might be delighted to know that Sam has found his grandfather's farm; Sam's parents would be happy to know that he is well and safe. Distribute blank index cards to students. The message and address (which students can make up) go one side, and the student's rendition of a story-scene goes on the other side.

PART 2

From "I Find a Real Live Man" through "I Pile Up Wood..."

WHAT HAPPENS

As summer fades, autumn sets in and winter approaches. Sam's survival skills grow and his physical well-being seems assured. He's aware, however, that he still needs occasional human interaction. Sam is happy to meet and shelter Bando, a professor of English who has wandered into the woods; to benefit from the haphazard ways of deer hunters who can't find their kill; and to take a walk into town and talk with a thoroughly-urbanized boy ("Mr. Jacket") his own age.

QUESTIONS TO TALK ABOUT

COMPREHENSION AND RECALL

1. Who is Bando? (*a college professor who's gotten lost in the woods*) Why does Sam feel sad when Bando leaves? (*Bando was fun to be with; he can make useful*

things from natural resources: e.g., a raft, clay containers, berry jam, willow whistles, fire bellows)

2. Sam sees signs of the coming winter in the way animals behave. What are some of these signs? (*the weasel's coat changes; raccoons fatten up; squirrels store food*)

HIGHER LEVEL THINKING SKILLS

3. As winter approaches, Sam gives a lot of attention to how to keep warm. One way to keep warm is through making warm clothes. What is the other way? (*build a fireplace inside his tree house*) What two major problems does Sam encounter? (*A. how to keep an all-clay fireplace from collapsing; B. how to make sure the fire doesn't pull all the oxygen from the house*) How does he solve the two problems? (*A. mix grass with the clay; B. use Frightful as a test-animal to see whether enough oxygen is present; bore knotholes to let in more air.*)

LITERARY ELEMENTS

4. Jean Craighead George doesn't talk down to her young readers! She often makes literary allusions, which — if they're clarified through discussion—add to students' understanding of the story. To clarify three important allusions Bando uses as he talks to Sam, you may wish to construct a chalkboard chart and discuss how the first two allusions apply to Sam, and the third to Bando's pottery project. Entries in the third column are examples of discussion results.

Word	What it refers to	How it applies to the story
Desdemondia	This is a version of Desdemona, the naive heroine in Shakespeare's "Othello." Desdemona takes things at their face value, and trusts people.	Bando thinks Sam is a pure and simple person who reacts honestly to the world around him.
Thoreau	Henry David Thoreau, a 19th century American writer, left the city and lived alone for 2 years at Walden Pond.	Bando sees Sam as a modern Thoreau who leaves civilization behind and experiments with living in the wilderness.
Wedgewood	Wedgewood is a beautiful and delicate kind of china.	Bando's clay pots are not fine and beautiful, but they are serviceable.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

5. Why does Sam want to celebrate Halloween? As he does this, what does he learn about himself and about the animals around him?

CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

HEALTH AND MEDICINE: *Checking-Out Herbal Foods*

Sam uses a wide variety of plants as basic foods and as seasonings for other recipes. You may wish to stress with your students that (1) pioneers used wild plants for health-taste-and-cure purposes only after they'd investigated the properties of the plants; (2) some wild foods mentioned in the story, such as winterberry, pennyroyal, and sassafras, are benign in certain circumstances and dosages, but harmful and even deadly in others. Suggest to students that they tour the aisles of a health food store, list some of the plant ingredients in various packaged products, use encyclopedias to find descriptions of the plants, and talk about what they would like to know about these botanical products before they use them. Then, in a follow-up class discussion, ask students to suggest why Sam knows what to eat and what not to eat as he maintains his health and builds his strength in his mountain environment.

ART: *Here's My View*

Ask students to work independently to find a passage in Parts 1 or 2 that especially builds word-pictures in their mind. Invite students to paint or draw their own illustration for the passage they've chosen. After showing their pictures to the class and getting feed-back on what classmates think the picture shows, students can write captions for their pictures, using book-quotes or their own rewordings. As a display strategy, students can exhibit their captioned pictures to show where the pictures occur in the story sequence.

HISTORY: *A Pioneer of Olden Days*

"Well, if it isn't Daniel Boone!" says "Mr. Jacket" when he meets Sam in town. Invite students to research the life of Daniel Boone, then discuss how Sam is both like and different from this legendary figure. As a kick-off, you might present this paraphrase of a remark Boone is supposed to have made: "I know it's time to move on when I can see the smoke from another man's cabin."

WRITING: *Is There a Moral?*

After trying to set up a Halloween celebration in the wild, Sam concludes "Don't feed wild animals!" With the class, discuss how Sam's experience leads him to this conclusion, or moral. Then ask students to work with a partner to find another of Sam's learning experiences, write a summary of it in their own words, and make up a moral, or lesson, that Sam learns from the experience. You might extend the activity by asking partners to share their work with the class and garner opinions as to whether the moral fits.

PART 3

From "I Learn About Birds and People" to the end of the book

WHAT HAPPENS

At Christmas time, Bando returns for a visit, and Sam's father appears unexpectedly to see how his son is faring in the wilderness. Sam learns that "wild-boy-of-the-mountain" rumors abound, and that he has aroused public curiosity. Sensing that his adventure is almost over, the boy finds special pleasure in the last, solitary

months of winter. Additional human visitors arrive in the spring, and Sam realizes that he has missed human companionship in some ways. Plenty of it arrives in June: Sam's entire family comes to the mountain to

QUESTIONS TO TALK ABOUT COMPREHENSION AND RECALL

1. What newspaper story does Bando bring to Sam? (*an article about a "wild boy" living in the mountains*) How has the news gotten out about Sam? (*sources: the fire warden, elderly Mrs. Fielder, several deer hunters*)
2. Who is Matt Spell? (*a young newspaper reporter*) What bargain does Sam strike with him? (*Sam will let Matt visit him in the spring, if Matt will agree not to reveal Sam's exact location and identity to the public.*)
3. Why does Sam's family move to the mountain? (*Sam's mother wants him to have a real home; she knows Sam dislikes the city; she, like Sam, loves the land.*)

HIGHER LEVEL THINKING SKILLS

4. Toward the end of his year alone, what challenges from nature does Sam face? (*ice storm; deep snow; a serious vitamin deficiency*) How is he able to cope with these problems? (*has stored up food and fuel; makes snowshoes; eats rabbit liver to get Vitamin C*)
5. During winter and spring, Sam has several human visitors. What feelings does Sam have about this situation? (*His feelings are mixed. He is glad to have human company, and suspects he may want to be "found." But he is also irritated at being "discovered," and sad that his isolation is disturbed.*)
6. Bando says to Sam, "Let's face it, Thoreau; you can't live in America today and be quietly different." What does Bando mean by this? (*"Different" people stand out; the public is attracted to people who are different, seeks them out, and so destroys their quiet life.*)

LITERARY ELEMENTS

7. Writers often foreshadow, or give clues about, what will happen next. Here are three events from Sam's story: Sam seeks out a friendship with Aaron; Sam enjoys Tom's stories about kids in town; Sam gets tired of writing in his journal, and goes to the library to get books to read. What major change do these events foreshadow? (*Answers will vary slightly. In general, Sam will decide that he can't spend the rest of his life alone; he needs human companionship and the sharing of ideas.*)



PERSONAL RESPONSE

8. Do you like the way the book ends? Explain why or why not.
9. Sam says of Frightful, "She was a captive, not a wild bird, and that is almost another kind of bird." What do you think Sam means by this? In what way might Sam's statement apply to himself?

CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

LANGUAGE ARTS: *Personification*

Explain to students that much of the powerful description in the story comes from personification: comparing non-human things to human actions and feelings. Give examples from the book: the air "says" snow; the wind "screams;" trees are "lifting themselves from their feet." Ask the class to review the book to find and list other examples of personification. Then ask partners to use personification to reword another sentence or brief passage in the story. One partner can read the new rendition to classmates and challenge them to find the original text.

WRITING/DRAMA *Imaginary Conversations*

Direct class attention to the last five paragraphs in "The Spring in Winter..." beginning with: "I cooked supper, and then sat down by my little fire and called a forum." Help students note that Sam is taking the roles of significant beings in his life, and in his imagination thinks about what they would say. On the chalkboard, record in play-script dialogue form the class's rewordings of the given text. Example:

Sam: What should I do about Matt Spell?

Dad: Go to the city and make sure Matt writes nothing about you.

Bando: No, it's all right. Spell doesn't know where you live.

Matt: I won't tell where you live if you promise me I can visit you.

Frightful: Don't let that Matt come up here!

After discussing with the class how imaginary conversations can help us examine different viewpoints, ask partners to choose another problem from Part III and explore it through dialogue. Examples: (1) Matt, Aaron, and Bando discuss why Sam should or shouldn't keep his mountain-top experience secret; (2) Sam and his parents discuss the pros and cons of Sam's living alone on the mountain. Invite partners to read their dialogue aloud to classmates.

GEOGRAPHY: *A Different Setting*

Ask students to summarize how planning ahead enabled Sam to live well on his mountain for a whole year. (You may wish to refer to the idea web on page 6.) Then invite students to discuss two or three different wilderness environments where a similar challenge-and-survival story might be set, for example: a mountain in another part of the world; a small, uninhabited island in the South Pacific. Distribute copies of the reproducible on page 15. Have students follow the plan-ahead directions.

Summarizing the Book

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

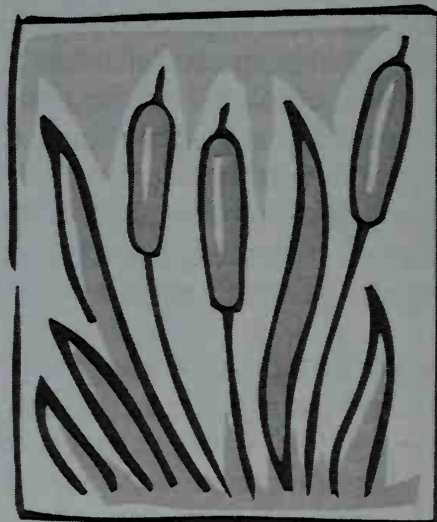
You can use any of the following activities as a way to help students summarize and reflect on what they have read and learned in *My Side of the Mountain*.

CLASS PROJECT: "Best Parts" Anthology

Ask each student to review *My Side of the Mountain* to identify a section title (e.g., "I Find Out What To Do with Hunters") that introduces an event that the student finds especially important or interesting. The student should then use the title as a caption for an illustration of a key event in that section. Arrange students' captioned pictures in story sequence in a folder. Then, with student volunteers, show and read individual entries to the class.

Discuss: (1) What event does each picture show? (2) How are the pictures of the same event different and alike? (3) Are there sections that nobody chose?

or that a great many people chose? (4) How do your classmates' choices help you focus on the main events and ideas in the story? (5) How does class discussion help you understand and appreciate the story better?



PARTNER PROJECT: *What's Next?*

Invite partners to continue Sam's story by (1) predicting what he might encounter after his family arrives, and then (2) writing a journal entry for Sam. Encourage students to compose section headings like those in the book, and to copy the first-person narration strategy.

Start-up example:

In Which My Youngest Sister Gets Lost in the Woods

When my family came to live with me, I thought glumly that there would be no more excitement. But when my two-year-old sister went toddling off on her own into the forest, excitement poured in like crazy! At first, we tried to find her by....

Suggest that partners read their work aloud to the class. Ask the audience to decide and comment on whether the event is resolved in a realistic way.

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT: *Different Points of View*

Invite students to write about Sam's experience using one of the following viewpoints and forms:

- ◆ a newspaper article by a reporter who has not personally met Sam;
- ◆ a magazine writer who has spent several weeks with Sam;
- ◆ a poet who thinks Sam is a great example of a human living in harmony with nature;

- ◆ a report by a social worker who is concerned about Sam's relationship with his parents;
- ◆ an imaginary viewpoint: a report about Sam by one of the many animals he befriends or gets to know;
- ◆ a letter-to-the-editor from Sam's mother, explaining why she lets Sam explore the wilderness alone.

You might have students compile their written work in a Sam File. Invite kids to read the file on their own, then engage the class in a discussion of how situations can be seen differently, depending on the observers.

EVALUATION IDEAS

Involve students in assessing their work by asking them to help construct rubrics for projects they work on. A rubric for *What's Next?* might include the following questions:

- ◆ Does the section heading summarize what happens in the anecdote?
- ◆ Does the anecdote tell about something that happens with Sam and/or with his family?
- ◆ Is the event realistic, like the rest of the book?
- ◆ Does the narrator keep the first-person point of view (I, me) throughout the story?

Possible Answers for Worksheets

All worksheets call for responses based on individual or group ideas; so, responses will vary. The important instructional and learning point is to ask kids to support their responses. Sample responses:

page 14: 1. CHART—Natural: fish (use as food); tree (use as shelter).

Manufactured: flint (use for making fire); twine (use for fishing). **Human:** trucker (use to get ride); librarian (use to get information). **2.** You might ask students to tell what they learned through conferring with group members. **3.** Students may note: Books are a manufactured resource and a human resource (librarian's knowledge). A stone wall is made of a natural resource (stone) fashioned by a human resource (the wall-builder). Ideas are resources when we use them to accomplish things; e.g., Sam successfully uses his idea for making an efficient fishhook.

page 15: While answers to **1**, **2**, and **3** may vary widely depending on sites students have chosen, students' responses to **4** should demonstrate the following: Planning ahead takes a lot of time! Sam is intelligent and cautious: he takes off for his adventure only after he's sure he has the know-how to survive. To undertake an escapade like Sam's, you have to be willing to put in a lot of forethought.

page 16: Most groups will conclude that *My Side of the Mountain* is realistic fiction because, overall, it meets the criteria in column 1 of the chart. Ask students to support their book choices by applying to them the column 1 criteria. Fantasy and fairy tale elements that students might inject are: other-worldly settings like mysterious kingdoms or other planets; plots and problems that rely on and get solved by "magic"; characters who have unrealistic powers and/or goals.

Name: _____

Classifying Resources

A resource is anything you use to accomplish a goal. A resource can be natural, manufactured, or human. The chart shows examples of resources Sam uses. Study the examples, then follow the directions below the chart.

Kind of Resource:	How Sam Uses It:
NATURAL: deer	for food; for hides to make clothes
MANUFACTURED: penknife	to carve fishhooks
HUMAN: Bill	to learn how to make a campfire

1. Review the first part of the book to find other examples of each kind of resource. Write the resources and Sam's uses of them in the chart. Use a pencil!
2. With a group of classmates, review your chart, then add to or change it as you wish.
3. With the group, discuss these ideas and questions:
 - ◆ Sam uses a library. Is this resource human? manufactured? both?
 - ◆ How does Sam use a stone wall as a resource? Is this resource natural? human? both?
 - ◆ Are ideas resources? Support your answers with examples from the story.

Name: _____

Planning Ahead

Recall that Sam did a lot of research and planning before he set off for the Catskill Mountains. Now imagine that you leave home for a while to live in another wilderness area. Use the following questions to do some research and planning of your own. Use atlases, encyclopedias, globes, maps, and other resources to answer the questions. You might also interview people who've visited your chosen hide-away.



1. To what isolated place will you go? Name it precisely. _____

2. Where in the world is your area located? Describe the location so that your classmates can find it on a map or globe. For example, give its latitude and longitude, or describe its relationship to other regions, countries, and continents. _____

3. Note vital survival facts about your hide-away: _____

Climate: _____

Some natural food resources: _____

Resources for building shelter: _____

Clothes and manufactured tools I might need: _____

4. Get together with a group of classmates. Discuss:
- ◆ how much time it took you to research accurate answers to the questions above;
 - ◆ how your research helps you to understand Sam better;
 - ◆ whether or not you'd be willing to undertake an adventure like Sam's.

Name: _____

Realistic Fiction

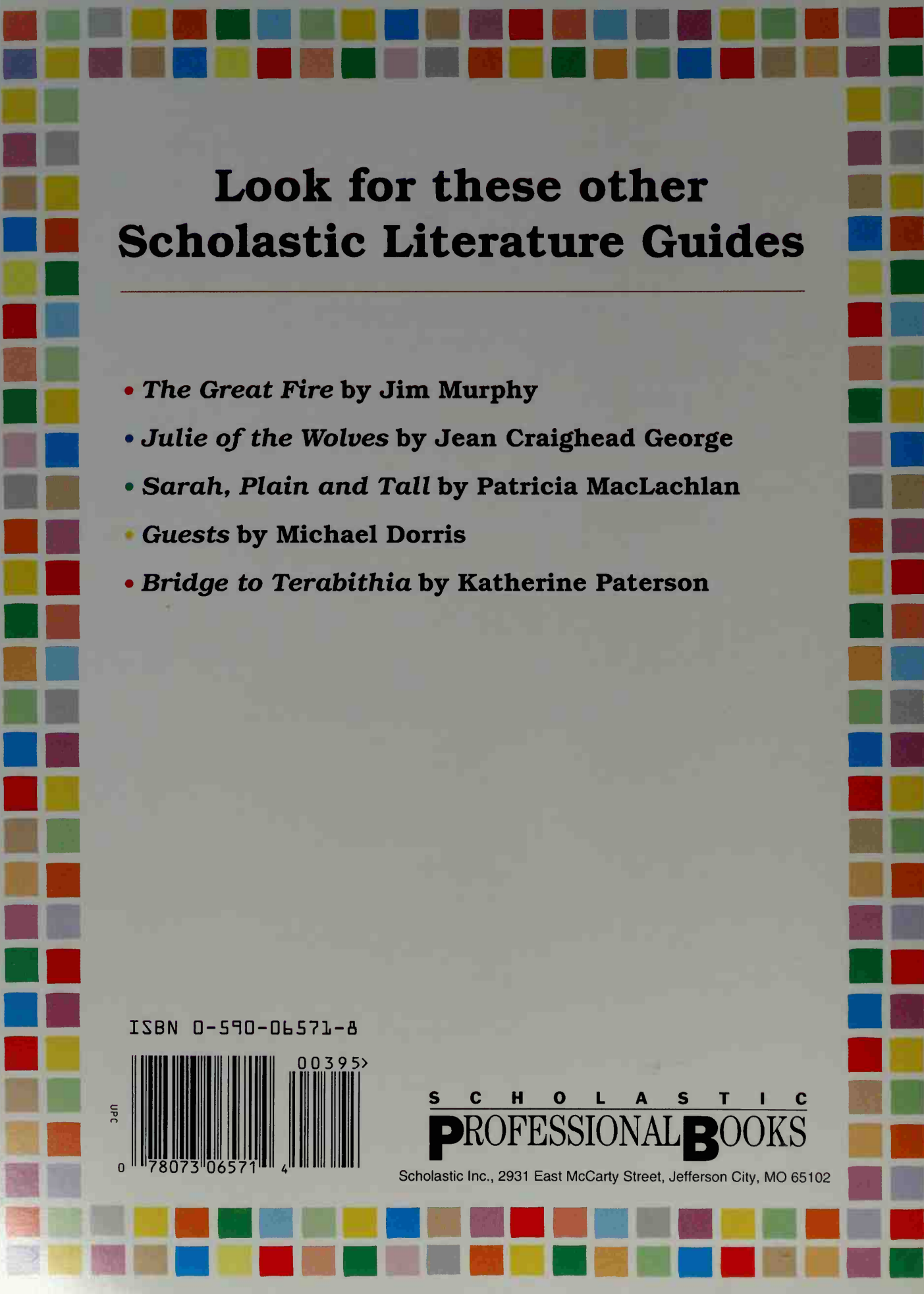
With your group, read the statements in the first column of the chart, and then discuss and respond to the questions in columns 2 and 3 of the chart.

1. STATEMENTS	2. REALISTIC FICTION Does it seem real? Why?	3. MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN Are there parts that seem unreal? If so, explain.
PLOT: The PLOT is made up, but sounds like something that could really happen.		
SETTING: The SETTING is a real place in an identifiable time.		
CHARACTERS: The CHARACTERS behave like real, lifelike people we know.		

After entering answers into the chart, work with your group to respond to the following:

- ◆ Is *My Side of the Mountain* realistic fiction? Explain why or why not.
- ◆ Name some other realistic fiction books you've read. Support your ideas by referring to column 1 in the chart.
- ◆ Suppose you wanted to turn *My Side of the Mountain* into a fantasy story or a fairy tale. What changes could you make to pull this off?





Look for these other Scholastic Literature Guides

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- *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George
- *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan
- *Guests* by Michael Dorris
- *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson

ISBN 0-590-06571-8



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